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THE RELIGION OF A LAYMAN

A STUDY OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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III. THE SIMPLICITY OF A GOOD LIFE

The Master never posed. He was not being good to be seen of men. He never seemed to be playing a part. He did not go about saying to himself, "This is what would be expected of a man in my position; I must be sure to do the correct thing." He was what he was without ever seeming to think of how it might look to others. He was not concerned about that.

You know Bernard Shaw says that if you go to a symphony concert you will find a great many people who are there not because they like classical music but because they know they ought to like it. They feel that it is the proper thing to be seen there, and so they go. In like manner when you get to Heaven you may find some people who are there not because they have any particular taste or fitness for that sort of thing but because they feel that they owe it to their social position to be in Heaven. How mighty are the conventions of society and how dull and tiresome many people become because they are constantly trying to keep up appearances!

The Master was as simple, natural, and unaffected as a sequoia tree. He had a keen sense of humor—he must have had for he was the Son of God. "He that sitteth in the heavens" must have laughed when he created the

pelicans, the monkeys, and some of us. You find this element of humor in many of the sayings of the Master. When he said to those self-satisfied Pharisees, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners," it was a delicious bit of irony. He knew that those self-satisfied prigs were anything but righteous. When he said, "They that are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick," that was his way of taking them off. And in the passage before us he pierced the swollen windbags of pretense and conceit by the keen thrust of laughter. It is often more effective than a serious argument.

He took up three forms of affectation which make against the simplicity of a good life. He first pictured the showy, pompous almsgiver. "Take heed that you do not your alms before men to be seen of them. When thou doest thine alms sound not a trumpet before thee in the street." When you send a ton of coal or a basket of provisions to a poor family, do not hire a band to go along. The least bit of showy pride in one's generosity robs it of all beauty. Think so little about yourself when you are doing good or being good that your right hand scarcely knows what your left hand is doing. There is not enough of self-consciousness in your action to find its way across from one side of your

nature to the other. "Let your alms be in secret, and your Father who seeth in secret"—it does not get by him—"shall reward thee openly."

The desire for the applause of men is a sorry source of motive. The boy who will not do his duty unless he is being praised and petted for it is a poor specimen; he is in a fair way to become a self-conscious, conceited little snob. The man who will not perform unless he is in the limelight is all lath and plaster where there should be quartered oak—you cannot depend on him. The young woman who will not purr unless her fur is being constantly stroked the right way with compliments and bouquets and five-pound boxes holds out no sure promise of ever being a companion and a helpmeet. All these people are only willing to do their prettiest "to be seen of men." The Master who had a keen eye for shoddy and counterfeit put them all into the discard.

Let every man do square work and square work only, regardless of the presence or absence of popular acclaim, simply because nothing but square work satisfies his own sense of what is right.

"He that giveth let him do it with simplicity." "It is more blessed to give than to receive"—a great deal more blessed. It hurts any healthy, self-respecting nature to receive alms. The giver of alms, therefore, who respects those whom he would aid avoids the sound of the drum which might fix attention upon his own generosity and upon the sad necessities of his fellows. He clothes his kindness in the quiet garb of modesty for his own sake and for the sake of others. He gives with simplicity.

The Master rebuked the man who paraded his self-denial. "When ye fast be not as the hypocrites of a sad countenance. They disfigure their faces that they may appear unto men to fast. But ye, when ye fast, anoint thy head and wash thy face that ye may not appear unto men to fast but unto thy Father who seeth in secret." You are not doing it to be seen of men. The beauty of self-denial is that it is a personal act where the inner life is striving for a more perfect sense of harmony with the infinite life of the Father. The soul is subordinating its personal pleasure or profit or convenience to some larger good which is to be secured; and the power of it lies in the simplicity and the naturalness with which it is all done.

How impatient those soldiers who have been in the trenches in France and have returned from overseas become when some windbag undertakes to plaster them over with compliments and to put halos around their heads with extravagant words about their heroism and self-sacrifice! These men have laid their bare hands on the naked realities of human experience. They have seen life stripped of all ornament and frill. They have looked straight into the eyes of death and now this fulsome language of compliment nauseates them. They did not do it "to be seen of men" or to be praised of men; and the moment any suspicion of unreality shows its head in the words of the man who is undertaking to parade their virtues before the eyes of a multitude, they look the other way.

Anoint your head and wash your face and smile when you practice self-

denial! The man who draws a long face and puts on a sad look when he sacrifices pleasure to duty or denies himself that he may make a larger gift to some worthy cause robs his action of its beauty and his soul of the reward it was meant to enjoy. And the principle is far-reaching. The professional smile which shows more teeth than soul; the company manners which are put on and taken off with the evening clothes; the chirping, grinning style of amiability which proclaims its unreality by being overdone; the affected mode of speech which shows upon its face that it is no more a part of the person's make-up than a badly made glass eye—all this would come in for the Master's condemnation as part of that which he called the hypocrisy of pretense. He would have every life real to the core.

"When you fast anoint your head"—let it all be done with an air of gladness. When the population of a beehive becomes congested the bees swarm. A great company of them under the leadership of a new queen goes forth. They leave their home and the stock of honey which they have helped to make, and they go forth empty-handed to find a new home and make a fresh start. And they enter upon that act of self-sacrifice with a song; bees are never so friendly as at the time when they are swarming.

Here in the Old Testament we find the same principle exalted! "When the burnt offerings began the song of the Lord began also with trumpets." Not in gloomy silence as if they were performing some hard duty from which they would have been glad to escape, but with a burst of music the people gave

of their best to the God they served. They covered the self-denial they were practicing with that radiant joy they felt in doing the will of the Most High. All this is well pleasing to him who looketh not merely on the outward appearance of a gift—"the Lord loveth a cheerful giver."

The Master also condemned the long-winded, ostentatious prayer. "When thou prayest be not as the hypocrites. They love to pray standing at the street corners to be seen of men. Verily they have their reward." They pray to be seen of men and they are seen of men. They get what they prayed for; they are settled with on the spot and there is nothing more coming to them as a result of their prayers. "But when thou prayest enter into thy closet; shut the door; pray to thy Father who seeth in secret and thy Father who seeth in secret shall reward thee openly."

Enter into thy closet and shut the door! The Master was not defining a physical act. He was not at all concerned about the place where a man should pray, but only as to the spirit in which it should be done. He insisted that every prayer should be a simple, direct, and genuine transaction between the soul of the man and God.

The minister standing in the presence of a great congregation may nevertheless enter his closet and shut the door, if his prayer is offered directly and genuinely to God. The Salvation Army captain standing at the corner of the street with her tambourine may nevertheless, by her complete self-forgetfulness and the genuineness of her moral interest in those lives she would touch by her appeal, enter into her

closet and shut the door as she prays to God. It all depends, not upon the place where one stands, but upon his attitude of soul.

The enterprising reporter on a Boston paper, sharing in that oft-remarked local pride, referred in his account of a religious convention to the lengthy invocation as "one of the most eloquent prayers ever offered to a Boston audience." He may have builded better than he knew. Many audiences have eloquent prayers offered to them in such showy fashion as to banish the whole spirit of devotion.

"When thou prayest," the Master added, "use not vain repetitions as the heathen do. They think that they shall be heard for their much speaking." He saw the futility of certain public prayers where the length and the breadth and the height of the petition are not equal. If the man who offers prayer in public has a good flow of language it is possible for him to keep it up for twenty-five or thirty minutes on occasion. Any man of pious habit can shut his eyes and talk indefinitely. And it is possible for people to keep their heads down and their eyes closed during the whole of that far-flung and long-drawn-out utterance. It might not be profitable, however, to inquire too closely into their thoughts during the whole of that period or into the ability of the man himself to maintain unbrokenly for all that time the sense of direct address to God. The real height of a prayer in its outward, upward, Godward reach is not always in direct proportion to its length.

I have been in the active ministry for thirty years and I know of no human exercise so difficult and so exacting,

which so takes it out of a man, as the act of prayer in the presence of one's fellows. If a man can take upon his own heart in sympathetic fashion the needs of those for whom he would pray and carry them up by his own vital faith into the presence of God with a genuine and sustained sense of the august nature of what he is doing and keep it up for five or six minutes he has done well. The moment he loses that sense of sympathetic, horizontal touch with the needs of his fellows and the vital sense of a perpendicular hold upon God, he had better say "Amen" and stop. It will not avail anything for him or for them if he keeps on talking in pious fashion with his eyes shut when he has really ceased to pray. The Master fully understood the difficulty of praying with genuineness and he therefore said, "Use not vain repetitions as the heathen do." Men are not heard for their much speaking.

"After this manner pray ye"—not always in just these words, but let these words indicate the general scope and method of your approach to God:

Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

There are just sixty-four words in that entire prayer. The average speaker utters from one hundred and forty to one hundred and fifty words per minute; many speakers utter from one hundred and eighty to two hundred words a minute. Take the lowest figure, one

hundred and forty words a minute! Here are sixty-four words which would be uttered in less than thirty seconds. The Master used no "vain repetitions." He did not undertake to be heard for his "much speaking," yet how the Lord's Prayer covers the ground and fits in around our needs like a well-made glove on the hand! How it lifts our souls into a sense of communion with God!

When the Parliament of Religion met at Chicago in connection with the World's Fair, Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Moslems, and Confucianists met together day after day to discuss this fundamental interest of religion. And with one accord they agreed to use each morning at the opening of the session the Lord's Prayer to voice their common request to the God of all. There is nothing equal to it in human speech. Its simplicity (for forty-nine of these sixty-four words are words of one syllable); its directness (for every request goes straight to the mark like an arrow from the bow); and its comprehensiveness, all served to make it acceptable to those men of all races and tongues and creeds, as no other single prayer known to men could have been.

Let us look at it more closely! "When you pray say Our." Let that be the first word on your lips—not "I" nor "my" nor "mine." You are not praying in solitary selfish fashion, but in the mood of social interest and sympathy. You are not unmindful of the needs of your fellows, even though you have entered your closet and have shut the door.

"When you pray say Our Father." Begin with these words on your lips,

with that thought of him in your mind, with that filial spirit in your heart. No man can offer the first two words of acceptable prayer unless he is striving to live as a child of God so that he may honestly claim his kinship with the Father. "If a son asks bread"—a son, not some outcast or vagabond who has cut himself off from fellowship with his father—he may be sure of his answer.

Then follow six brief petitions. They fall into two groups of three each. The first group has to do with God's Name, his Kingdom, his Will. The man's personal needs are postponed until these wider needs and broader requests have been uttered. "Hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy Will be done on earth."

Then we come to the second group having to do with man's needs—his bread, his sins, his temptations. "Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." Here is that subordination of personal and private interest to the larger values which is characteristic of all honest prayer and of all right action!

"Hallowed be Thy Name." It is not a mere request that we be kept from profane swearing. The word "name" as the Hebrews used it meant the nature which was designated by that name. Let all those principles, ideals, and values which belong to the nature of God be kept sacred! It was a prayer that reverence might be felt and maintained for all that is worthy to be revered. Hallowed be Thy Name and hallowed be that which his Name denotes.

"Thy Kingdom come." The Kingdom of God is not a place yonder in the sky rather than here on earth. It is not a place here in the church rather than yonder on the street. It is the designation of a certain quality of life. Wherever you find the sway and rule of the Divine Spirit you find his Kingdom.

"The Kingdom of Heaven is within you," if your heart is right. "The Kingdom of Heaven is among you," if the social relations of your group are as God would have them. "The Kingdom of Heaven is like leaven" in that this quality of life communicates itself to other lives when conditions are favorable until the whole lump of life is leavened. "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a pearl of great price" in that a man can afford to invest all he has to secure that high quality of life. You see the meaning of the phrase! Thy Kingdom come, here, now, anywhere, everywhere. We want that quality of life which owns the sway and rule of the Divine Spirit to be universal.

"Thy Will be done on earth as it is in Heaven." Here is a prayer that human life in all its interests and relationships may be rebuilt and built better after the pattern shown us from on High! Thy Will be done—it is not the expression of a passive resignation, the word of a man who is ready to put up with what cannot be avoided. Thy Will be done by me, by you, by all hands! Help us to do it in active, effective fashion! Make us co-laborers with God in doing his will on earth as it is done in Heaven!

What is his will? It is his will that I should do that which is just and right; that my home should be a place of

peace, joy, and love; that my place of employment should be a scene of fair dealing and of intelligent good will; that my neighborhood should be a ward in the city of God; that my town should be clean and wholesome as a fit dwelling-place for those who are the children of the Most High; that my nation should be a nation whose God is the Lord, in whose work for righteousness all the nations of the earth are blessed. That is what we mean when we say, "Thy Will be done." It is a prayer which reaches from the Great White Throne to the darkest, dirtiest street in the city slum, from the heart of the Infinite Father to the last item of interest in the lives of his children.

Then we come to the second group of petitions which have to do more intimately with man's needs. "Give us this day our daily bread." It is significant that of these six requests five of them have to do solely with those interests which belong directly to character. They deal solely with moral and spiritual values. Only one with things material! And that one is a modest request for just enough of bread to get through the day. A man does not pray for enough of bread to last two hundred years, or for a bank account big enough to buy everything he sees. He does not pray for a house with twenty rooms and an automobile and a steam yacht, and all the rest. "Give us this day our daily bread." It is legitimate to pray about things material as well as about things spiritual, but in this model prayer the ratio is five to one in favor of the spiritual.

Here as everywhere the prayer is social—it is not "Give me my bread"

but "give us," the people in our home and on our street, and on that street of need. Give us, Americans and Armenians, Syrians and Serbians, Russian and Polish peasants, the famine-stricken Hindus, and the starving Chinese, our daily bread! It is a prayer which warms the cockles of a man's heart toward those whose needs are greater than his own.

Not what we give, but what we share,
For the gift without the giver is bare.
Who gives himself with his alms feeds
three,
Himself, his hungry neighbor and Me.

"Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us." It does not mean that a man purchases his own forgiveness from God by showing a forgiving spirit toward those who have wronged him. The Master was not setting up a bargain counter here in the heart of this model prayer. It means that no man can be forgiven unless he has a forgiving spirit.

God sends his rain on the just and on the unjust alike, because a man can be rained on no matter what kind of a man he is, but the man who comes to God with grudge and bitterness and ill-will in his heart toward his fellow-beings cannot be forgiven for his own sins until he has changed all that. "Forgive as we forgive"—a forgiving spirit opens the door for the Divine Forgiveness to enter. "If ye forgive men their trespasses your Heavenly Father will also forgive you."

Beautiful are the reactions which come from that broad-minded, large-hearted method of dealing with the shortcomings of our fellows! "Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain

mercy." It was a well-known public official who had been slandered by lying newspapers and attacked by a murderous assassin who all but killed him, who said, "I forgive everybody, everything, every night." Father, forgive as we forgive.

Then as a last request, "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." God does not lead men into temptation. We can be sure of him. It was the apostle James who said, "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God, for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth He any man."

But temptation comes from our misuse of those things which God places within our reach as opportunities. The love of gain and the desire for success, the instinct of sex, and the wish for happiness—these are not evil things. They are all good things, but they may all be misused in such ways as to become sources of evil. We turn them into temptations to evil in place of using them as opportunities for growth, for joy, and for service. Lead us, O God, so that all these occasions may not be sources of evil but pathways of advance!

Here, then, is the perfect prayer as it fell from the lips of the Master! It contains no vain repetitions. The man who uses it is not trying to be heard for his much speaking. It is a clear, concise, cogent appeal to God. Its simplicity, its directness, its adequacy, lift it up into a class by itself.

It was said of the One who uttered it, "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth." The language of religion was translated into terms of life and that Life dwelt among

us, winsome in its method and sound to the core by its absolute veracity.

You may wish to ask me how prayer works. I am frank to confess that after a life of prayer through more than fifty years this august exercise of human intelligence and of the moral will is clothed in mystery.

But we live and move and have our being in the presence of unsolved mysteries. When I think of an X-ray piercing through my coat sleeve and through the flesh of my forearm, enabling the surgeon to study the bones and ascertain if any crack or fault be there, I am amazed. When I think of a Marconi telegram moving out across land or sea without wires to guide it until it reaches the receiver hidden away hundreds of miles, it may be, below the horizon, I am awed. When I think of a single atom of radium holding in its tiny clasp enough of energy to keep a clock ticking for a hundred years, I am filled with wonder and reverence. And when I ask a thoughtful man of science to tell me the nature of these subtle, mysterious forms of energy which men have learned to use for their help, he shakes his head—he does not know.

What is the nature of that mysterious force on the wire which flows down the trolley and moves the electric car, and lights it and heats it? No one knows. The motorman calls it "juice," and when he has said that he has done just

as much to express his ignorance of the final nature of electricity as the scientific man has done when he has used thirteen words of seven syllables each.

We know something of the method of its operation and something of the results which can be secured. The nature of electricity remains a mystery unsolved. But how foolish I would be to stand on the street corner on a cold dark, rainy night refusing to avail myself of the help of that mysterious energy to reach my home. How foolish I would be to plod along in the dark and cold when I might be sitting comfortably in that car reading my evening paper and being carried swiftly to my destination!

I have seen so much of the benefit of this habit of prayer in my own life, in my own home, and in the hearts and homes of others, that I want my prayer for strength, for guidance, for comfort, for aid in doing my duty, for blessings upon the lives of others to go up to God backed by all the faith and hope and love which I can put into it, even though I do not fully understand the final nature of the forces which operate through prayer. In this great and vital interest, I know of no one whose guidance I would rather accept than the guidance of him who said, "Ask and ye shall receive. Seek and ye shall find. Knock and it shall be opened unto you."